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ABSTRACT

Van Duyn Elementary School (Syracuse, New York) implemented a site-based project to develop student character. The neighborhood is a racially mixed, stable, private home community with 58 percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunches. The school's objectives as part of a shared decision making, pilot school process were to have staff, students, and parents trained in mediation through the "New Justice Conflict Resolution Program" and to review, develop, and implement "Discipline with Dignity" and "CARE" to improve students' respect for themselves and others. "CARE" stands for courtesy for all people; achievement in the learning environment; respect for property and self; and environment: keep it safe for everyone. The "New Justice" component included training in conflict prevention and intervention for teachers and students through inservice programs and workshops, respectively. "Discipline with Dignity" is a program specifically designed for school settings and is based on the basic tenet that discipline can be a win-win proposition for students. Program results were difficult to assess but suspensions in 1993 were 270, 277 in 1994, and 253 in 1995. However, when student discipline referral data was disaggregated according to type of offense, the declining trend became inconsistent. In addition, significant leadership instability (two new principals and three new assistant principals in 3 years) may have had an impact of the program's effectiveness. (JB)

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Handle with CARE: A Site-Based Character Development Project

By Ronald K. Theel

This article describes one elementary school's implementation of a site-based project to develop student character.

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to describe one elementary school's implementation of a site-based project to develop student character. Additionally, it will illustrate the importance of integrating a collection of school-wide staff development programs into a coherent framework thereby promoting the synthesis of new approaches which can be more easily translated into practice. The ability to integrate these programs and strategies into a coherent framework is critical to bridging the gap between "dreaming and doing."

A description of the school, the process of developing the site-based plan and the overall objectives of the plan as related to character development are discussed. Then, the programs which were implemented in order to achieve the plan's objectives are reviewed including information regarding the necessary staff development. The challenge of evaluating the impact of these programs upon student behavior is examined. Finally, recommendations and insights about staff development based upon Van Duyn's experiences in implementing these programs will be shared.

The School

Van Duyn Elementary School ("Van Duyn") contains grades pre-kindergarten through six, and is located in the southwest quadrant of Syracuse, New York. The neighborhood is a mostly stable one of private homes. The community is racially mixed, mostly European-American in its southern reaches, more African-American in the northern part. Fifty-eight percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch. The total enrollment is 515 students: 48% African American; 47% European American and 5% Native American.

In response to New York State's *New Compact for Learning* requiring all schools to have a mechanism in place for shared-decision making by 1994, Van Duyn staff in 1992 agreed to become a shared decision-making pilot school in the early stages of the

process. Teachers were selected by their peers to serve on the school's site-based team as representatives of their grade level assignments. As part of the planning process, action teams were created to investigate areas of concern that were identified by the site-based team. Virtually all staff members served on an action team. Parents and community members were also part of the process, serving on both the site-based team as well as on action teams. One action team was concerned with developing criteria and implementing a plan to help students exhibit respect for themselves and appreciate the diversity of others. The team wrote the following objectives designed to help implement this goal (1) Van Duyn staff, students, and parents will be trained in mediation through the "New Justice Conflict Resolution Program" and (2) programs such as "Discipline with Dignity" and "CARE," designed to improve student's respect for themselves and others, will be reviewed, developed and implemented. Members of the action team dealing with diversity selected the above programs because of their specific applications to a school environment. These programs were developed by educators and former educators and readily utilize teachers as trainers. Other action teams were devoted to instruction, home-school relationships and monitoring the site-based plan.

Implementation

Van Duyn's site-based planning team is comprised of approximately two dozen volunteers, serving as representatives, from the staff, parents and business community whose input is used to formulate the plan. The team meets every spring to review the plan and make revisions for the upcoming school year. This team chose to implement the above-mentioned programs primarily because of their applications to a school setting. The following is a discussion of these three programs and their staff development components.

New Justice

The first component of the Van Duyn character development initiative involves staff and student training from New Justice Conflict Resolution Services, Inc., a United Way agency concerned with conflict prevention and intervention in the Syracuse community. Such a focus would hopefully serve as a preventative measure to help diminish an increasing number of discipline referrals at the school. By June 1993, four Van Duyn staff members voluntarily completed a twelve-hour New Justice training program called "Understanding Conflict: Communication Skills for Resolving Conflicts Peacefully." These individuals served as turnkey trainers for the remainder of the staff. In the fall of 1994, trainers utilized a staff development day to provide an overview of the program for the entire group. The agenda included communication and conflict resolution skills, techniques of reflective listening, assertion, shared decision-making and problem-solving. In March and October 1995, two one-half day workshops were devoted to providing follow-up training for all staff. At this time, student mediators "role played" various conflict resolution situations so as to familiarize staff with the substance of mediation. The process for referring students to mediation was also reviewed along with the purpose of the program.

A second skills program, New Justice Mediator training, is designed specifically to prepare staff and students to facilitate resolution of interpersonal disputes. At Van Duyn, approximately 24 fifth and sixth graders have received three half-days of mediation training each year since 1992. Students were selected on the basis of teacher recommendation. Training sessions were held during the school day and trainers are provided from New Justice Services, Inc. Additionally, the teaching assistant responsible for monitoring the in-school suspension program as well as some support staff were also instructed thereby allowing an adult trained in mediation to be always present when a student mediator is settling a dispute. In the fall of 1995, Van Duyn

received funding from the Syracuse City School District to expand training to interested parents. Trainers from New Justice, Inc. conducted parent sessions which were held during the day at the school. The content of these workshops emphasized family dynamics, stress management, child development and behavioral expectations.

The mediation process has a place within the schools as it promotes learning and acceptance of the differences that exist between people. It also requires that students deal respectfully with one another--even when engaged in a dispute. Students have the opportunity to learn about the consequences of their own behavior as they work out their differences or help others to do so. In-school mediation affects the student mediator as much as those involved directly in the conflict. At a recent moving up ceremony for sixth graders, a student mediator publicly thanked the principal for bringing New Justice to Van Duyn so that "students could learn to get along without fighting." Other student mediators have commented that "mediation helps people to solve problems."

Discipline with Dignity

Van Duyn staff members participated in training with Drs. Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler's *Discipline with Dignity* program. The Van Duyn site-based planning team selected this particular program because of its applicability to a school setting and its basic tenet that discipline can be a win-win proposition for students instead of the traditional win-lose situation. In May 1994, Dr. Mendler presented a one day overview of the program to Van Duyn staff during a superintendent's conference day. The training began with theoretical concerns such as attitudes, principles and questions of values. Then, specific strategies were discussed including methods for defusing power struggles, establishing locus of control, developing a classroom and school-wide discipline plan, implementing effective consequences, avoiding power struggles and setting guidelines for positive student confrontation.

Two Van Duyn staff members volunteered to receive three days of follow-up training during the course of the year. These individuals became turnkey trainers and provided an additional day of follow-up training for interested staff in June 1994. This workshop was held on a Saturday and participants were paid a stipend for attending. The turnkey trainers also offered a "refresher session" as part of an October 1994 staff development day. The trainers provided further instruction during a half-day workshop in March 1995. This session examined the ways in which *Discipline with Dignity* and *New Justice Conflict Resolution* are compatible. The *Discipline with Dignity* program provides the philosophy for Van Duyn's building-wide approach to discipline: responsible thinking, cooperation, mutual respect and shared decision-making. The *New Justice* program focuses on conflict intervention and conflict prevention and its in-school mediation component promotes learning and acceptance of differences that exist among people. Thus, these programs support each other.

The strategies described above enable teachers to spend less time dealing with behavioral problems and more time on instruction and positive interactions with students. Such an approach also helps children develop a sense of self-esteem. Furthermore, *Discipline with Dignity* provides students with the encouragement and tools necessary for making responsible decisions in their lives, both within and outside the classroom. The goals of the program are as follows: (Curwin and Mendler, 1988)

- Providing warmth: love, respect, concern, acceptance.
- Setting clearly defined limits: providing a structured environment through rule enforcement.
- Establishing a democratic atmosphere with opportunities to be heard as well as a marked degree of decision-making and problem-solving.
- Developing skills in recognizing and resolving conflict.

These tenets served as the foundation for the work that would be undertaken by the CARE committee.

Care

A committee of staff and parents met in the spring of 1994 to investigate ways of establishing positive methods to reinforce self-discipline in students and develop ways to recognize positive behavior on a school-wide basis. Concerns arose from the shared perception about "out of control" behavior in the cafeteria as well as the need to develop some behavioral guidelines for specific areas of the school such as the playground and buses. As an initial step, this group developed a set of school and community expectations for students, staff and parents at Van Duyn:

Courtesy for all people. School and community members are expected to behave courteously as "you would like others to be courteous to you." Back-talk, obscene gestures and refusals to follow reasonable directions given by adults are not allowed.

Achievement in the learning environment. Class work and homework are to be completed; being unprepared and skipping class or school is not tolerated. Students are encouraged to do their best at everything they do. Everyone should have the opportunity to achieve to the best of his or her ability. Disruption of another student's learning time and teachers' instructional time are not permitted.

Respect for property and self. Students are reminded to keep the school building, as well as personal property, in good condition. Vandalism to the school building, grounds or personal property is not acceptable behavior. Theft of school or personal property is not permitted.

Environment: keep it safe for everyone. School staff help to insure a safe environment, free from thoughtless actions, by reminding students to be safe. This component includes a number of "intolerables," i.e., running in the building or on buses, and possession of weapons or controlled substances.

Staff development for this component is primarily in the awareness stage in which the principles of CARE are being shared with Van Duyn staff, students and parents. Posters outlining the tenets of CARE hang throughout the hallways and in each classroom

and the code appears in the student handbook. At the start of the school year, building administrators invited all students to a Good Behavior assembly. The above "code" was explained to students and a "Van Duyn CARES" ribbon given to each student to start the year on a positive note. One of Van Duyn's school/business partners established a CARING student of the month award. Students nominate their peers based upon the CARE criteria they have seen enacted. A monthly drawing is held in which the names selected (one from primary, one from intermediate) receive a prize donated by the school's business partner. Morning announcements are used to remind students of the components of CARE by designating a word of the week: e.g. courtesy, achievement, etc. Students are asked to think about and discuss the definition of the word and to find applications of the meaning in the school community. Through repeating the CARE code in a variety of ways, its message hopefully will become internalized and a sense of community will develop.

Program Results

The total number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions increased from 270 in 1993 to 277 in 1994 and decreased to 253 in 1995. It should be noted that student enrollment increased from 456 in 1992-93 to 477 in 1993-94 and climbed to 515 by the close of the 1994-95 school year. Throughout this three-year period, components of the character development initiative were introduced. At present, the impact of the project upon student behavior is difficult to accurately assess. When student discipline referral data is disaggregated according to type of offense, the declining trend becomes inconsistent. For example, the number of discipline referrals resulting in in-school and out-of-school suspensions for fighting increased from 64 in 1992-93, to 100 in 1993-94, and declined to 63 during the 1994-95 school year.

During this three-year interval, Van Duyn experienced significant leadership instability: two new principals and three assistant principals. The impact such administrator turnover had upon the effectiveness of the overall programs is difficult to

assess; however, the programs were maintained. The site-based plan provided focus and continuity in this area from "bottom-up" instead of "top-down" as each new administrator assumed his role.

Insights

As a result of my experiences implementing the three programs described in this article, I wish to share the following insights:

1. It is critical to bring as many staff members and parents "on-board" as possible. This may be accomplished by offering stipends to participants for Saturday or "after-hours" workshops and providing child care.
2. An effective staff development program for character development should provide for follow-up and support during the course of the year. Utilizing staff members as turnkey trainers and can ease other staff members' anxieties about implementing a new program and lends credibility to the change process.
3. To facilitate implementation, staff development programs should be able to be integrated into a coherent framework and components should be compatible. Within the overall umbrella of CARE, *Discipline with Dignity* established the philosophy and *New Justice* provided the "how-to."
4. Within school settings, staff development programs need to be applicable to the unique goals and realities of each school building and to remain focused on the ultimate end-user, our students. The programs outlined above are meeting with success because they recognize the behavioral aspect of character education.
5. The inclusion of specific staff development programs as part of a school's site-based plan will help insure continuity in the face of administrator turnover. The plan serves as a "touchstone" to which new administrators and staff constantly refer.

Children need opportunities to reflect on and talk over their value-related experiences. Teachers play an important role in assisting students to solve problems; they give students broader perspectives on what they are doing. The learning is in the doing. Schools should not merely help children think and talk about issues of character but should go a step further and *enact* their virtues. Perhaps then we will be one step closer to establishing a Community Actively Respecting Everyone.

Resources

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Further Information

For additional information regarding the *Discipline with Dignity* and *New Justice* programs and materials please contact:

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